
DEBATES

UP AGAINST THE WALL: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE NEW ATTACK ON THE CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT: A REPLY TO ANDREW JACKSON

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The crisis facing the labour movement and the continued loss of middle-class jobs in Canada has fueled a robust discussion across this country. In 2013 alone, in Toronto, I have seen union members come out in unprecedented numbers for the Canadian Labour Congress Political Action Conference and the Right to Work fight-back organized by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. I have also seen strong initiatives launched by community groups, union members and academics to grapple with the crisis and have even read articles in the mainstream media asking the question “whither labour”. “Up Against the Wall” is a timely and useful contribution to this discussion.

Most people would agree with Dr. Jackson’s contention that the crisis facing the Canadian labour movement emerges from both the anti-union policy agenda of right-wing conservatives, borrowed and adapted from similar initiatives in the United States, and the erosion of union density in sectors where union density was historically high: manufacturing and public services. In his conclusion, Jackson exhorts unions “to emerge from this crisis by taking on broad-based sectoral and issue-based campaigns that engage and mobilize both union and non-union workers, that unions seek to expand and not just defend labour rights, and create spaces for new union organizing.” I recommend a two-pronged approach building upon the recommendations in this statement.

As Jackson points out, Canadian labour policies and the Canadian labour movement are stronger than their US counterparts (as measured by union density, progressiveness of labour regulations and capacity to raise standards through collective bargaining in Canada). The section titled *The State of the Movement in Canada and the United States* elaborates brilliantly upon the differences between Canada and the United States that fuel this differential. We must retain these standards.

Therefore, one prong of the fight-back against the anti-union attack must be to strengthen internal organizing, a term used for organizing existing union members to fight for their collective bargaining agreements.. Anti-union forces have been drawing a lot of attention to the wages and benefits differential between union and non-union workers, fueling a clawback of standards for unionized workers in the shape of wage freezes, attacks on the rights of workers to collectively bargain and attacks on the benefits of unemployed workers.

Faced with increased pressure from employers at the bargaining table, Canadian unions have been fighting for their members; but, sometimes, these are defensive battles driven by a small number of activists and staffers. When the fight ends with a settlement, the staffers and activists move on to the next crisis and the people mobilized for the fight get demobilized and return to work with a new status quo of pay cuts, benefit cuts, layoffs, or plant closures. Instead of a battle, we should prepare structures for a longer term war. What supports must the members have in place to fight for the long-term in order to be empowered, to deepen the ranks of members who are active in the union, and to continue to mobilize so that the lowered standards do not become the new reality? This is the driving question of internal organizing.

One example of a long-term fight is that still being waged by CUPE's Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) in British Columbia in the aftermath of their collective agreements being ripped up by Gordon Campbell's Liberal government in 2002. Services like cleaning and food services were contracted out across the province and HEU waged a war to organize and raise standards for the workers employed by the third-party contractors. One part of the strategy was to organize the contract employees working for the various health authorities in British Columbia and bring them into HEU. However, according to the contracts signed with the province and health authorities, the wages and benefits the contract workers were entitled to were far below the standards established in the contracts that were ripped up. HEU has therefore worked for the past decade to raise standards for contract workers with each contract and through a living wage campaign. HEU members helped in both the organizing and contract campaigns. HEU also supported networks of internal activists who drew attention to health concerns emerging from cost cutting by contractors (e.g., Compass Group at the Vancouver Island Health Authority). Activism by HEU has been behind some of the moratoriums on outsourcing at health facilities in British Columbia. There have been wins and losses in this grueling fight that has lasted for over a decade; however, HEU and its members have worked to improve standards for contract workers and the fight has engaged members for the long-term.

There are other examples of long-term fights by unions, locals, and labour federations. One mentioned by Jackson in his conclusion is the decade-long fight to organize home-based child care workers waged by the Confédération des

syndicats nationaux (CSN) in Quebec. However, there are also many examples of battles fought for the short term, with little follow-up to empower members to continue to fight and recover from clawbacks. Right now, activist union members are gearing up to fight back against the anti-union initiatives from right-wing elements in Canada. Before taking our fight to the political parties, building lobbying campaigns, or sending off press releases, we must deepen internal organizing, sincerely, with a will to address member concerns with their unions and with enough resources to support robust organizing. This is what the union movement is built upon: the power of our members.

The second prong of what Jackson emphasizes in the conclusion to the paper is organizing non-union workers in the largely non-union private sector. He recommends that unions undertake sectoral campaigns, uniting community and labour organizations to genuinely raise standards. This approach is integral to fighting our way out of the crisis. During my work in Ontario, I have seen some strong, broad-based, community, academic, and labour alliances emerging to raise standards for non-union workers. A recent campaign brought unions and community together to halt the outsourcing of cleaning work by the City of Toronto. This campaign raised the fair wage for City of Toronto cleaners to \$12.75/hr and is developing a quality jobs protocol to guide the City Council and its staff in outsourcing decisions. As well, unions and community groups are fighting to support migrant farm workers in Ontario and have been in a decades-long fight to gain the right to organize these workers into unions. I work for a union that is trying to organize homecare workers and cleaners across Canada and right now we are also working with baristas in Nova Scotia in a sectoral campaign. Unions are also organizing hotel and casino workers.

These particular initiatives are based on an industry wide approach to organizing. Industry wide campaigns are about organizing an industry in a geographic area. To be successful, these campaigns must successfully raise standards. Raising standards for workers is partially at the employer level, through grievance processes and a voice at work. However, to see marked improvements in pay or benefits, often, one must change policies and practices prevalent in the industry by trying to impact government policies and engage in campaigns that influence investors and third parties that contract with the employers in those industries. Why? Because many employers are no longer in complete control of what they can pay workers due to industry practices that keep pressure on lowering costs. Therefore to be successful, it is integral to understand that these are long-term wars to organize entire industries, and not just short-term fights of a few weeks or months. It is also important to understand how the industry works and what must be changed to raise standards, above and beyond the collective bargaining process.

The best way to fight, when you are up against the wall, is not always to fight directly; it is to remember why you are fighting in the first place. Unions and

union members need to start talking about how unions have become the way people access basic rights as employees; the wins we have made against bullying supervisors; and the grievances we have won. We also need to make sure that our current union density is translated into power to fight back against the current attacks on unions and raise standards.